

The 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 21. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland  
Nigel Taber-Hamilton

I have sometimes told the story of how my very good friend, Albert Ogle - an Irishman who has definitely "kissed the Blarney Stone!" - won a preaching prize. It was when he was in seminary. The way it worked was this: you were given a text, and five minutes to prepare your sermon. Then you preached it. Albert's text? "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge!" I doubt anyone of you would want to come up here and try it?! It's quite a challenge! So I thought I'd accept it (except I spent more than 5 minutes preparation!).

That phrase was, according to Ezekiel, a well-known proverb, but to our ears it isn't quite as transparent or familiar as saying something like "I'd rather be a big fish in a small pond than a small fish in a big pond," or "Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Fortunately for us, Ezekiel unpacked what that proverb meant by telling his readers (and thus, us) how it was wrong. It was wrong because "It is only the person who sins that shall die." So what this proverb meant was the opposite of that: that the sins of the parents will be visited on the children. It must have been popular, in spite of what Deuteronomy says (26:16): "Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents; only for their own crimes may persons be put to death."

Now let's put the "death" bit aside for a moment (or perhaps permanently!) And look at what these two passages say: they say "we are responsible for our own actions," and it implies that if we are responsible for our own actions then we must have the free will to act in responsible ways.

As much as I might like it, the Old Testament does not speak with one voice. The first creation story only talks about blessing. But the second creation story blames death, pain, and the drudgery of work on Adam and Eve. Most Christian theologians (who have been, until recently, male) have tended to blame just Eve. In fact much of Christian theology about sin and death blames Eve. The most prominent is Augustine of Hippo (not our Augustine!), who popularized what came to be called "original sin" - that human beings are born sinful, and are totally worthless - only God can redeem that sinfulness.

The Reformation picked this up with gusto! Luther's theology of Justification only makes sense if we are steeped in original sin and unable to save ourselves. Calvin institutionalized it. The 39 Articles of the Church of England tried to do the same (though mercifully most good Anglican gentlemen agreed that such a belief was too unseemly to be mentioned in polite company and the articles died a quiet death over the next 100 years!).

Our Puritan forebears brought the idea of Original Sin to north America, and it is thoroughly embedded in our culture. We feel guilty. Well, sometimes we are! But only sometimes. Yet much of the way we live is built around the view that we're basically unworthy. We build facades, of course, but for most of us, somewhere inside, our self-worth isn't on the right side of healthy. So it is that when someone says, as we enjoy sunny weather "we'll pay for this" - they're talking out

of that vision of Original Sin. We don't deserve sunny weather. In fact, we must have done something sneaky, or underhanded, to make it come. And God will get us because of what we did!

Today we're living in an age where this view of Christian identity has come under direct, sustained, and - I believe - appropriate challenge, and not for the first time.

A British monk named Pelagius proposed - out of his Celtic heritage - a different view. Humans were not, he is reported to have said, wounded by Adam's sin. We are born with free will, and we are perfectly able to fulfill live wholesome lives, and be one with God. In essence, Pelagius denied what Luther later claimed, that , apart from any divine aid (which Luther called "Justification") we can do no good thing.

The tricky thing about Original Sin is that its useful - very useful - because it acts as a control mechanism for those in the hierarchal/patriarchal camp within Christianity. Fear is a valuable tool; fear of death even more so. If "Original Sin" is true, then boy, are we in trouble.....unless!

Unless we reject "original sin" in favor of what Pelagius appears to have proposed; something that's come to be called "Original Blessing." As Matthew Fox has said: "*The forces of fear and pessimism so prevalent in society and religion need to be countered by an increased awareness of awe and goodness.*" Our Christian tradition is seeped with people who have tried to do this - Francis of Assiss (who's day we will celebrate next Sunday), Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen, Teilhard de Chardin, Julian of Norwich, Dorothy Day, Matthew Fox, and many others.

Fox talks about a new religious paradigm to counter Original Sin's oppressive, pessimistic view of humanity that he breaks into four parts:

**Path I: Befriending Creation--the Via Positiva.** We need to embrace creation - have a sense of beauty, of justice, of the presence of God in everything, an awareness that the Kingdom of God is ALWAYS NOW, a sense of personal freedom and worthiness, an awareness of what Fox calls a "royal personhood." God made us; God made us good; that demands of us a response.

**Path II: Befriending Darkness, Letting Go and Letting Be--the Via Negativa** In our lives we experience pain, emptiness, silence, negative things. Healthy Christian tradition has seen these moments as times when God is most present to us. As Me i ster Eckhart, a Reformation mystic, said: "Remember this: All suffering comes to an end. And whatever you suffer authentically, God has suffered from it first."

**Path III: Befriending Creativity, Befriending our Divinity--the Via Creativa.** We humans are creative beings! We all have gifts that we so often oppress ourselves. Art, music, conversation and writing, listening, or just being - we have gifts, and God calls us to use them to bring them and their beauty back into the world - to birth them anew. In that sense, Fox says, we are *co-creators of the cosmos with God.*

**Path IV: Befriending New Creation--Compassion, Celebration, Justice, the Via**

**Transformativa.** God is in motion in the world and at work in people everywhere. We are called to look for ways in which God is present and working for justice and loving community.

**If we're mindful - and mindfulness is one way to describe prayer - then we will help birth this view that all life as a blessing.** This is the original blessing, from which all other blessings derive. You can see that in the great Jewish Rabbi Abraham Herschel, who said "Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy." This is an unfamiliar form of spirituality for us, but, I think an attractive one. And a necessary one. Our world - all of our world - needs to be treated as if it's a blessing. And everyone in it needs to be treated as if they are blessings. And all animals, and all things - they are all blessings, in God's great scheme of creation. They are all good. They are all good. They are all very, very good. And so are we.